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FEATURED

MDI'S CAREER SKILLS PROGRAM: 'UPSKILLING' TODAY'S WORKFORCE

By Carrie Manner Staff Writer cmanner@hibbingdailytribune.net Nov 16, 2019



Deb Klebs smiles next to her poster during the Gallery Walk portion of MDI's celebration for graduates of their Career Skills 101 and 201 program on Tuesday in Hibbing.

Carla Magnuson

HIBBING — This week, 18 graduates of MDI's Career Skills 101 and 201 classes were

honored with a celebration among family, friends and community members.

Michael Raich, the interim president for the Northeast Higher Education District and an MDI board member, welcomed Tuesday morning's crowd – which included State Sen. David Tomassoni – at MDI, located just off Highway 37 in Hibbing.

“MDI – Minnesota Diversified Industries – truly believes in empowering people to use their abilities and not to focus on their disabilities,” Raich said. “Part of empowering people's abilities is to provide training where it would be important, and that's exactly what this program represents.”

MDI is a nonprofit organization that manufactures corrugated plastic packaging and environmental services through production assembly. They are headquartered in Minneapolis with locations in Hibbing, Grand Rapids and Cohasset. Nearly half of their workforce is made up of people with disabilities.

During his introduction, Raich explained that the Careers Skills program is the result of MDI hiring an outside group in 2016 to aid in the development of a curriculum to strengthen employees' soft skills, such as communication, self-esteem, eye contact, goal setting and social introductions. Anyone going through the program is taught to recognize their own abilities and identify aspirations as they develop lifelong career skills.

Raich noted that in the years since the program's inception, 176 individuals across all of the MDI facilities have completed the training. “It's been pretty impactful when you think of the number of people involved who have upskilled their ability to go through life.”

The graduates seated in the front of the room were a blend of MDI employees, three Hibbing High School students and several community members. The mix, Raich said, represented part of MDI's vision: to not only train those within “but to make the community stronger as a whole.”

Before the ceremony, various posters were hung around the room in a gallery walk-style presentation. Each poster displayed a different skill the group worked to develop throughout the course; these areas included customer service, fun at work, personal development,

change, self confidence, solution circles, communication and feedback, team building and self confidence. Graduates were positioned near each poster, ready to share the lessons learned with attendees who passed by.

Deborah Klebs, an assembler at MDI, was here wearing her light blue company shirt and beamed at everyone who paused to hear her speech. “We did a customer service class and we made a team promise for world-class customer service,” Klebs told the Hibbing Daily Tribune. “We also watched a video from an ice-cream parlor who got some feedback from a customer and decided that the thing to do to make him happy would be to ‘Give him the pickle.’”

“Give him the pickle,” as she explained it, is a catch-all phrase for identifying what it is that the customer wants and offering it to them.

“I really, really liked making our team promise and also really liked the whole idea behind ‘give them the pickle,’” Klebs continued. “Like, find your thing and just embrace it because it’s what will keep the customers happy.”

Natasha Bailey’s poster was another stop along the way. She spoke about accountability and professionalism. “If we see a problem, we own it, we solve it and we do it,” Bailey said.

As the celebration got underway, Brenda Goral, a trainer at MDI, stood at the front of the room and praised the graduates. “They’re people that are really committed to learning and truly committed to MDI. They have worked hard. We’ve had a lot of fun and I think that the skills Career Skills 101 and 201 offer are skills that can take anybody forward in their work life, their home life and their community life.”

The course also had a theme: “We are all human. We are the CEOs of our lives.” Through creative, problem-solving activities, participants learned about proper greetings, writing SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time specific) goals, what grit and perseverance looks like, having a positive attitude, being punctual, what a leader is, communication styles, workplace culture, and many other topics.

During the presentation, the crowd chose Tomassoni, Mikal Brown, director of Career Academy at Hibbing High School, and Mary Ferris, office manager at the Hibbing Daily Tribune, to participate in a game. Using their non-dominant hand, Brown and Tomassoni each had to work together to tie a cord into a bow around Ferris's arm. The crowd laughed as the trio strategized, providing a real time example of the activities the graduates went through during the course.

Certificates were then distributed to all graduates, who each stood and read prepared summaries about their personal talents and future goals. Some spoke about their dreams of finding employment at places like MDI. Others wanted to learn to weld, drive or start their own business. As each accepted their framed certificate of completion, Goral shared each person's positive attributes and the improvements she saw from each throughout the program.

"They're just an amazing group of employees," Goral later told the HDT. "They were so eager to learn." She also thanked the sponsors, which included the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board, Northland Foundation, Johnson Foundation, Schulze Foundation, Enbridge Foundation, Owens Charitable Foundation and Otto Bremer Trust.

Susan Sorci, a paraprofessional at Hibbing High School, told the HDT she drove the three HHS students to class each day, where she sat with them and observed. "I've been with that whole group from the start to the end and have watched them grow and change," she said. "They all bonded personally – all of them – like a family. It's going to be hard not to come back. It's a great program."

MDI Operations Manager Andrew Tracy was also here, watching the ceremony with pride. He told the HDT, "I think it went great. We had a lot of participation and this was a really good group. Without them it's not possible."



